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Misperception and the Use of Force: A Commentary on Ralph White's "American Acts of Force"

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Ralph White's argument about the important role of demonized enemy images, lack of realistic empathy, and misperception in the processes leading to crisis and war find important parallels in the theoretical and empirical literature on international relations. I emphasize that military superiority is not sufficient to deter adversary aggression and that White's proposed guidelines for policymakers have some overlap with contemporary theories of crisis management.

I feel honored to have this opportunity to write a commentary on Ralph White's essay, "American Acts of Force: Results and Misperceptions." This essay continues to develop and apply certain important themes that I first encountered when I read White's (1968) *Nobody Wanted War* as a graduate student. That book, along with some of his later work (White, 1984, 1986), helped to influence my own thinking and that of the international relations field more generally about the role of misperceptions in international conflict.¹ It is, thus, with considerable admiration for Ralph White that I approach this task of writing a scholarly commentary on his most recent essay.

The task of examining a dozen acts of force undertaken by the United States, evaluating their outcomes in terms of a number of criteria, explaining these actions and their consequences in terms of psychological and political variables, and proposing guidelines for future policy is, needless to say, an ambitious task. It may be too ambitious for an article-length study. One cannot expect the author, in a single

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¹I recently came across a striking indicator of White's general influence: The *Social Science Citation Index* (1997) shows that, in 1996, other scholars cited White's work from the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. In an area known for the rather short half-life of its scholarship, this is remarkable.

ticle, to elucidate and defend his criteria of evaluation, justify his selection of cases, define all of his variables, support all his historical judgments, defend his explanations against alternative interpretations, and offer guidance for future policy.

For this reason, a comprehensive critical review of White's article that focused on case selection, research design, operationalization of key indicators, and normative criteria of evaluation would not be appropriate. As a political scientist, I think I can make more of a contribution by suggesting how some of White's arguments relate to the theoretical and empirical literature in international relations. In that literature, we will find added support for some of White's more general theoretical propositions, less support for others, and important linkages between some of White's explanatory concepts and other lines of theoretical argument by international relations theorists.²

Let me begin, however, with some quibbles that I have about White's assessments of the outcomes of a few cases and the criteria by which he evaluates them. Although I sympathize with the normative considerations underlying White's internationalist criteria, I think that the inclusion of a measure of the extent to which the use of force advances the national interest of the state would be appropriate, as any policy prescriptions must ultimately be made in terms of national interests, however broadly defined if they are to be effective.

White does this indirectly to a certain extent within his broadened category of military success, but I prefer that the political outcome be given more prominence, following von Clausewitz's (1976) conceptualization of war (and the use of force short of war) as an instrument of policy in pursuit of state interests. White raises a good point, however, when he argues that, if one abandons myopic short-term thinking and adopts longer term time horizons, the differences between his internationalist criteria and criteria based on "enlightened national self-interest" begin to vanish.

Disputes over specific criteria aside, however, I think that many readers will conclude in the end that White's classification of his 12 cases in terms of "good," "bad," and ambiguous results are fairly reasonable. The two that I take exception to are White's two "ambiguous" cases, World War I and the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf War. One can argue about the allies' wisdom in imposing a Carthaginian peace on Germany after the First World War, but the war's outcome of avoiding German hegemony on the continent clearly outweighed the costs of the war, and the American impact on that outcome was significant.³

²For reviews of the international relations literature on the causes of war, see Vasquez (1993) and Levy (1998).

³Recent research supports the argument for attributing primary responsibility to the war to Germany (Albertini, 1980; Fischer, 1961, 1975). In addition, perceptions of innocence by the German people after the war was strongly influenced by an extensive propaganda campaign by the German government (Herwig, 1987).

Debate continues as to whether the Bush Administration ended the Persian Gulf War prematurely. Given what we know now about Iraq's nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons programs and determination to develop them more fully, however, it is clear to me that the outcome of the war was positive in terms of White's internationalist criteria—certainly in comparison with a negotiated peace that left Iraq's weapons of mass destruction untouched and free from external monitoring.

White's general argument that, because of lack of empathy and misperceptions, states frequently do not do enough to avoid crises and wars commands greater support in some of his cases than he acknowledges in this essay. Although the American victory over Japan in the Pacific War was an unqualified success, one can certainly raise the question of whether the United States did everything possible to avoid the war. The United States oil embargo against Japan was a highly coercive policy that backed Japan into a corner and led its leaders to perceive no choice but to gamble on a war that they did not expect to win but that they hoped might force the United States into a negotiated settlement. In the end, however, I think it would have been difficult to find a negotiated compromise that would have satisfied both Roosevelt and the Japanese military leadership (Iriye, 1986).

Although many historians would agree with White's assessment that, after 1953, it was the United States who was the more aggressive of the two adversaries, White misses a chance in the earlier period to reinforce his argument regarding the importance of misperceptions in generating escalating conflict spirals. He goes too far in attributing responsibility for the origins of the Cold War to Stalin. White's statement that "there was little or no provocation by the West" is hard to reconcile with the United States' cutoff of lend-lease and denial of a loan to the Soviet Union, with Soviet perceptions of American atomic diplomacy in its use of the bomb against Japan, and its more general concerns about United States economic imperialism and "capitalist encirclement."

Having made these comments about some of White's specific historical cases, let me now turn to some respects in which White's analysis relates to the larger international relations literature on the use of force and the causes of war. I begin with the relation between misperception and war, for White's (1968) earlier work on this subject had a clear influence on the substantial international relations literature on misperception and war (Jervis, 1976, 1988; Lebow, 1981).

I agree entirely with White's assessment of the importance of a demonized enemy image, an idealized self image, absence of realistic empathy, overconfidence, and underconfidence in the processes leading to war. I differ from White only in that I would conceptualize the first three of these as the sources of misperceptions rather than as misperceptions per se. I would also emphasize that, under some conditions, misperceptions contribute to peace rather than to war, though through different causal paths. We also need to acknowledge that the concept of misperception involves some difficult problems of definition and measurement (Jervis, 1976, 1988; Levy, 1983).

There are a variety of types of misperceptions, but the ones most likely to have a major impact on the processes leading to war are misperceptions of the capabilities and intentions of adversaries and third states. Misperceptions of intentions may derive from secondary misperceptions of the adversary's (or third state's) value structure, its definition of its vital interests, its definition of the situation, its expectations about the future, and the domestic or bureaucratic constraints on its freedom of action (Levy, 1983). These, in turn, relate to White's concepts of demonized enemy images, absence of realistic empathy, idealized self-images, and other variables. Overconfidence in war results from underestimation of the adversary's capabilities relative to one's own and from misperceptions of both the intentions and capabilities of third states. Motivated biases and unmotivated distortions in information processing also affect these processes.⁴

Let me now turn to some of White's ideas on the use of force and relate them to research projects in the international relations literature on conventional deterrence, coercive diplomacy, and crisis management. In noting that most uses or threats of force by the United States (at least those in his sample) ended in military success, White emphasizes that each of these successes involved the defensive use of force to protect others and that each of the failures involved the aggressive use of force against others (as White defines the terms). We need to be careful in generalizing from White's analysis of 12 U.S. cases to international behavior more generally, however, even if we were to accept White's operationalizations of aggressive or defensive and success or failure and his evaluations in the U.S. cases.

There have been few systematic studies of this question in the literature, and studies that have been done focus on "initiation" rather than "aggression" because of the difficult problems involved in defining aggression. One study of wars involving great powers shows that initiators won only slightly more than one half the time in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries but were nearly twice as likely to win as targets were in the next two centuries (Wang & Ray, 1994). Because some initiators in fact fit White's category of "defender" (Israel in the 1967 war, for example), however, it is hard to directly compare this and related studies (Buono de Mesquita, 1981; Maoz, 1983) with White's. The discrepancy between White's findings and those of others suggests, however, that further research on this question is necessary before we can generalize from White's findings.

Regardless of the exact proportion of aggressors that win or lose, White makes a strong argument that, in cases in which aggressors do lose, it is often the aggressor's lack of empathy with its adversary or with third parties that plays a

⁴Although there is some value in White's concept of a demonized enemy image, which he defines as exaggerations of evil in an adversary's character, we must be careful to distinguish this from more general perceptions of hostility in the game of *realpolitik*. President Kennedy perceived Khrushchev as a hostile adversary, but he did not, contrary to White, demonize Khrushchev or the Soviet people.

central role in its initiation of the use of force (see also White, 1968). The frequent inability of a state to understand how its adversary (or its adversary's allies) defines its national interest or perceives threats to those interests can lead to war or an escalation of war because (a) the threat or use of force provokes the adversary into escalating the crisis rather than coercing him into submission; (b) war, and sometimes even the threat of war, unites the adversary's warring parties at home and mobilizes the population for warfare to the extent that the aggressor failed to anticipate; and (c) the consequent miscalculation of third state intentions leads to a larger war than was anticipated. The conflict spiral in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war illustrates the first point. The Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 illustrates the second point, in that Sunnis in Iran supported the Shiite Iranian regime rather than the Sunni regime of the Iraqi invaders. The United States' war with China provides a classic example of the third point.

The importance of the absence of empathy that leads to misperceptions is related to White's argument that, although most cases of failed aggressive military action sprang from military overconfidence, almost all such cases involved not a miscalculation of tangible indicators of military power or military overconfidence but rather a faulty assessment of the "psychological nature" of their adversaries or third parties.

I would define "psychological nature" more broadly to include perceptions of the adversary's resolve, its intentions, its ability to mobilize its population for war, and the willingness of third parties to intervene in support of the adversary. Although there have been no systematic studies that compare the relative frequency of misperceptions of relative capabilities as opposed to misperceptions of intentions, White's argument derives some indirect support from both qualitative and quantitative studies of deterrence success and failure and of the effectiveness of military threats more generally (Levy, 1988).

These studies show that the relative balance of military capabilities—defined in terms of tangible indicators of power—do not always determine the outcome of international crises in terms of who prevails and who is forced to yield. A balance of military capabilities is not sufficient for either deterring the adversary from initiating military threats or from following through on those threats. In addition, the overall balance of power between states has at most a secondary impact on the success or failure of deterrence.

When states attempt to deter a potential aggressor from attacking a client state, however, there is evidence that the balance of conventional capabilities in proximity to the target does play an important role (Huth, 1988). Taken together, these findings are consistent with the argument that the utility of military threats depends on the threatener's possession of a spectrum of military capabilities and options appropriate to the level of the threat and the behavior that it is attempting to influence (George & Smoke, 1974). This point should be incorporated into White's guidelines for future policy.

The finding that superior military capabilities are not always sufficient for deterrence can be explained in part by the tremendous importance of the interests and resolve of the contending parties. George and Smoke (1974) emphasize that the "asymmetry of motivation" often has a greater impact than does the balance of power on crisis bargaining and outcomes, a finding that is supported in quantitative studies of all militarized disputes since 1815 (Bueno de Mesquita, 1981; Maoz, 1983). For this reason, it is clear that the absence of empathy that leads to misperceptions of the intentions and underestimation of the resolve of adversaries and their potential allies can play a significant role in the origins of international crises and wars.

I should mention two other factors that are important in explaining the offensive use of force. One, neglected by White, is the role of domestic political considerations. Under some conditions, political leaders beset with internal political and economic problems may be tempted to use military force beyond their borders. This might serve the purpose of securing external resources to help alleviate internal problems, which was the primary factor driving Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 (Freedman & Karsh, 1993). It might also serve as a means of diverting attention from internal problems and creating a "rally 'round the flag" effect to bolster political leaders' internal support, as illustrated by the Argentine invasion of the Malvinas in 1982 (Levy, 1989). Thus, domestic factors may play an important role in aggressive external action and may strongly reinforce political leaders' resolve not to back down in international crises.

Another factor that can affect states' resolve and intentions—one that White neglects in this study but that he has discussed elsewhere—is loss aversion. This theoretical concept derives from prospect theory and from the behavioral decision theory literature more generally. The basic argument is that people frame their choices around a reference point, overweight losses from that reference point relative to equivalent gains, and make risk-averse choices among gains but risk-acceptant choices among losses. They also adjust to gains much more quickly than to losses and, thus, reframe around new acquisitions but not around recent losses (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

The phenomena of loss aversion and the asymmetry of risk orientation for gains and losses has potentially important implications for state behavior in international crises and in international behavior more generally, although the problems involved in generalizing from controlled experimental studies to the ill-structured world of international relations are quite substantial (Levy, 1996, 1997).

One implication is that state leaders take more risks to maintain their international positions, reputations, and domestic political support than they do to enhance those positions. Moreover, after suffering losses (in territory, reputation, domestic political support, etc.), political leaders take excessive risks (relative to expected value calculations) to recover them, whereas, after making gains, political leaders reframe their reference points and take excessive risks to defend them

against subsequent losses. Thus, if State A loses territory to State B, A will take excessive risks to maintain her gains, whereas B will take extreme risks to recover her losses.

Finally, there is an interesting overlap between White's guidelines for policymakers and the guidelines for effective crisis management that some international relations theorists have developed. George (1989), for example, argues that certain "political requirements" of crisis management (limiting both one's political objectives in crisis and the means one employs) are necessary but not sufficient for resolving a crisis in a way that achieves the twin objectives of avoiding war without sacrificing vital national interests.

Statesmen must also adhere to a number of "operational requirements" of crisis management. These include (a) maintaining top-level civilian control of military options (rather than delegating politically-relevant decisions on the use of force to the military); (b) coordinating diplomatic and military moves in a combined politico-military strategy; (c) selecting military actions appropriate to limited crisis objectives; (d) selecting military actions (coupled with diplomatic signals) that demonstrate one's intentions to negotiate, while avoiding those actions that give the opponent the impression that one seeks a military solution, which might give the opponent the incentive to preempt; (e) creating pauses in the tempo of military actions to slow down momentum of events and minimize the danger of loss of control; and (f) selecting diplomatic and military options that provide the opponent a face-saving compromise (for reasons of domestic politics as well as international reputation) that leaves her a way out of the crisis that is compatible with her fundamental interests.

CONCLUSION

I have tried to show that, in his article on "American Acts of Force," Ralph White has identified a number of patterns and suggested several explanations that have some important parallels in the theoretical and empirical literature on international relations. This is perhaps not surprising, for some of that literature reflects the influence of some of White's earlier work over a period of three decades.

Not all readers will agree with White's criteria for the evaluation of the use of force, and some will quibble with certain aspects of his methodology, his explanations for certain patterns and particular outcomes, or his guidelines for policymakers. It is clear, however, that White's essay reflects a strong commitment to an internationalist perspective and to the important role of the scholar in identifying patterns in world politics, grounding those patterns in concrete historical cases, and generating policy-relevant theories that will be useful to policymakers as well as to scholars.

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